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Scientific Letter

Crimea – naval and strategic implications of Russia's annexation

Background

On 27 February 2014, elements of the Russian armed forces invaded Crimea. While the world watched, they surrounded military installations, sank blockships at the entrances to two naval bases,[1] seized Ukrainian naval vessels, and arrested the Commander of the Ukrainian Navy.[2] Largely bloodless, the operation was both a strategic surprise and an operational success.[3] On 17 March, President Vladimir Putin acted upon the results of a referendum that his government had administered in Crimea the day before and formally announced that the Russian Federation had annexed the territory.[*] In examining these events, a June 2014 report by Sweden's Defence Research Agency asserts that "[t]he crisis in Ukraine has already gone so far that there is no way back to the *status quo ante*. The implications will be far reaching and go on for many years to come."[4] There is merit in that assessment, because Russian actions have seriously challenged, if they have not undermined, the post-Cold War order in Europe[†] and could be the harbinger of significant strategic concerns elsewhere.[‡]

The context

Regardless of the contingency planning that undoubtedly occurred in Russian policy and military circles over many years, the timing of Putin's decision to order the invasion of Crimea was obviously determined by events taking place in Kyiv, most notably the toppling of the increasingly authoritarian regime of Viktor Yanukovych. That, and the rejection by the demonstrators of the ousted president's decision to move closer to Moscow, was a debacle for Putin's foreign policy. Probably also fearing that the events in Kyiv might resonate with a Russian public that some believe was growing disenchanted with his government[5], and long determined to reassert Russia's role in the post-Soviet space,[6] the invasion can be seen as

[*] As happened in 1940 when the USSR annexed the independent Baltic republics (i.e., Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), neither Ukraine nor the Western Powers recognise Russia's *de jure* authority over Crimea.

[†] Putin has argued that a new order needs to be constructed that excludes the US from Europe and is, instead, built upon an intensification of security relations between France, Germany and Russia. He made this proposal most recently in a speech before senior Russian Foreign Ministry officials and Russian ambassadors on 1 July 2014. See Julian Lindley French, "President Putin Means What He Says", *Lindley French's Blog Blast; Speaking Truth to Power*, 10 July 2014 [accessed on 16 July 2014 at http://lindleyfrench.blogspot.ca/].

[‡] As one historian noted, we need to "remember that the game does not end when [a leader] makes up his mind to act or not to act, for once decisions are implemented they assume a life of their own, producing reactions and counter-reactions among the other players and creating situations that may confound original expectations." See Gordon Craig, "The Historian and the Study of International Relations", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 88, No. 1, February 1983, p. 4.

opportunistic. Putin correctly gauged that the interim government in Kyiv was too disorganised to put up any effective resistance and that the international response would be perfunctory at best.

So far, playing the nationalist card has served the Russian leader very well, for his popularity soared following the annexation.[7] The "return" of Crimea to Russia addressed a deeply felt need in the country's national psyche that Putin likely shared.[§] In his 18 March speech announcing the annexation, he noted that "[e]verything in Crimea speaks of our shared history and pride."[8] He spoke of its loss following the USSR's demise as an open wound, echoing views that other Russian officials (including President Boris Yeltsin) had voiced during the past two decades.[9] Indeed, at the time the USSR disintegrated, Russian leaders, including prominent reformers, demanded that Crimea not be included in an independent Ukraine.[10] So while recent events have been a shock to Western governments, the intensity of Moscow's challenge to Kyiv's sovereignty in Crimea, most obviously expressed by the recent annexation, was always a litmus test of the state of Russo-Ukrainian relations.

Despite that, the speed with which Putin decided to incorporate Crimea and Sevastopol into Russia was a surprise. Outside of his inner circle no one knows for certain what role the annexation of Crimea plays in Putin's ambitions regarding Ukraine. It is well-known, however, that many Russian leaders have refused to acknowledge, or have made dismissive comments about, Ukraine. And Russian diplomats have frequently spoken of Ukraine's relations with NATO as endangering their country.[11] This is made very clear in the 18 March speech when Putin asserted that Ukrainian membership in NATO and a larger presence by the Western Alliance in Crimea and/or the Black Sea would pose a threat to Russia.[12] Seizing Crimea, along with the support provided to the insurgents in Ukraine's eastern oblasts, are likely intended to coerce Kyiv into following Moscow's lead or risk further instability.

Russia's Navy as an instrument of National Policy

In the *Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2020* (2001), the Navy was identified as the "main pillar and foundation of maritime capabilities (…), one of the tools of foreign policy and is designed to protect the Russian Federation and its allies in the oceans by military methods."[13] This was shown during the war with Georgia when ships of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) bombarded Georgian ports, sank several naval vessels in the port of Poti and one at sea, maintained a blockade of the coast, and conducted an amphibious assault into Abkhazia.[14] It has also been demonstrated more recently by an effort to resume a regular presence of warships "in strategic areas of the world ocean."[15] Putin's Russia believes that a Great Power requires a modern navy both to confirm its ranking and as an asset for policy. In 2010, the commander of the Navy observed that Russia "as successor to the great Soviet Union means that it must have a powerful and balanced ocean navy to protect its interests in any part of the world ocean where such interests exist, and they exist everywhere."[16]

The Navy nonetheless faces significant challenges. Downsizing of the fleet and of personnel, as well as reduced training and maintenance, have taken their toll. Many platforms and systems are more than two decades old and serious problems are frequent.[17] In 2012, Putin announced that 4.4 trillion roubles (or US $138 billion) would be allocated to build eight SSBNs, 16 SSNs and 51 surface ships by 2020.[18] In late-2013, a Russian publication reported that 41 warships were contracted with 24 under construction.[19] Along with the acquisition of a French-built Mistral

[§] Russians often spoke of the "loss" of Crimea, implying that its inclusion in Ukraine was somehow illegitimate. However, in the Ukrainian Independence referendum of December 1991, 54 percent of Crimeans (with a 60 percent turnout) voted in favour of Ukraine's declaration of independence.

amphibious assault ship, current plans call for the Black Sea Fleet (the third-largest of the four in the Navy) to be almost completely replaced.[**] However, while impressive in its aim, much about the programme is opaque, with sources of funding unclear.[20] Some commentators doubt that the plan will achieve the goal of an effective blue-water navy.[††] Even the commander of the Russian Navy has claimed that the regeneration programme will only be completed at the earliest by 2032, 12 years later than planned.[21]

Immediate implications of Crimea's annexation

Despite its challenges, the Navy is a major beneficiary of the Crimean annexation. Although much of the Black Sea Fleet (BSF) is obsolete, it is the largest and most capable fleet in the Black Sea basin. This will not change in the near- to mid-term as the Turkish Navy must take its Aegean and Mediterranean waters into account, and neither Bulgaria nor Romania is currently planning any increase to their navies. The BSF also benefits from Russia's *de facto* control of Crimea in that restrictions imposed by the treaty with Ukraine on both basing and repairing its vessels in Sevastopol are no longer relevant. The removal of these restrictions should improve the fleet's overall readiness. Access to airfields and ports in Crimea, as well as former Ukrainian signal intelligence facilities, will also enhance the BSF's ability to project power throughout the region. Last, the annual rent which Moscow had to pay to Kyiv for leasing Sevastopol (approximately US$100 million) and the funds allocated to build a base at Novorossiysk are now available to upgrade and fortify naval facilities in Crimea.

The occupation of Crimea has transformed the maritime picture of the Black Sea basin:

a. ***The Black Sea naval balance has been altered in Russia's favour –*** In February 2014, Ukraine operated the third-largest navy (after Turkey and Russia) in the Black Sea. As a result of the annexation of Crimea, Russia has eliminated Ukraine as a regional naval Power. Most of the Ukrainian fleet's ships and nearly 12,500 out of a total of 15,000 naval personnel were based in Crimea, testifying to the significance of the peninsula in Kyiv's naval planning. While Russia has returned a number of ships and a few maritime helicopters seized during the occupation,[22] all naval infrastructure (i.e., the fleet headquarters, a major base and five facilities) in Crimea is lost to Kyiv. Reports also indicate that many Ukrainian naval personnel in Crimea have either changed their allegiance or have resigned.[23] Ukraine's expulsion from Sevastopol might be seen in Moscow as a "restoration of historical justice", but it also confines Kyiv's vestigial fleet and any new ships that it might acquire to Odessa, a port easily blockaded in the event of a future Russo-Ukrainian conflict.[24] To attempt to secure its maritime boundaries and enforce its sovereignty in a much-reduced Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), Ukraine must now rely upon one Krivak-class frigate (commissioned in 1993) and three coastal

[**] In addition to six Admiral Gorshkov-class frigates, with three due to enter service in 2014, and the reassignment of two Neustrahimy-class frigates currently deployed in the Baltic, plans announced in 2011 include the addition to the fleet of new Kilo-class submarines and an unspecified number of Krivak –IV-class frigates. See Matt Clements et al., "Moscow looks to bolster Black Sea Fleet", *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 10 February 2012.

[††] "[T]he Russian government set aside $156 billion for shipbuilding to 2020, or roughly $19.5 billion annually. This funding is expected to result in eight nuclear missile submarines, 14 frigates, 35 corvettes, six small artillery ships, and six landing ships – a total of 69 vessels. (…) In 2011, seven ships were decommissioned, in 2010, 42 left service, and in 2009, nine were removed from the lists. (…) The addition of five ships a year until the end of the decade certainly will help rejuvenate the aging Russian fleet, but it will not counteract its decline to the extent desired." See Ian Sundstrom, *Despite Lavish Funding, Russian Navy Dead in the Water*, Centre for International Maritime Security website, 12 November 2012 [accessed on 9 July 2014 at http://cimsec.org/russian-navy-modernization-drag/].

patrol boats. Russia effectively controls Ukraine's access to the Black Sea and by default access to the global sea lines of communication.

b. ***Russia controls access to Crimea's oil and gas –*** In annexing Crimea, Russia has obtained control over highly lucrative undersea oil and gas reserves that had formerly been within Ukraine's EEZ. In early-2012, oil exploration specialists judged that the Ukrainian waters now under Russian control have enormous potential and warrant serious investment to develop reserves that some suggest might be equivalent to those that had existed in the North Sea.[25] We do not know the extent to which a desire to seize control of Crimea's oil and gas might have influenced Russian strategic planning. Nevertheless, it is true that the loss of control over these reserves will increase Ukraine's dependence on Russia for its energy needs, an asymmetric relationship that already benefits Russia politically. The elimination of Ukraine as an alternate supplier to meet future energy requirements will likely also increase Russian influence in Europe's southern tier countries, particularly in the Balkans.

c. ***Russia now controls all Crimean shipbuilding –*** Control of Crimea's state-owned shipyards will be welcomed by Russia's strategic planners. In early-June, Deputy Premier Dmitri Rogozin, a hardliner in charge of the country's military-industrial complex, stated that "Crimea currently has several large ship repair and shipbuilding plants (…) which were among the largest during the Soviet times. We have already evaluated their potential and have already decided to start production of some of vessels and marine equipment at their facilities this year."[26] Indeed, it is expected that all 23 of Crimea's defence industry plants and shipyards will participate in the modernisation of the Navy, addressing a previous shortfall in shipbuilding capability that observers noted could derail the naval buildup.[27] In keeping with the National Security Strategy (2009) that emphasised new defence capabilities as well as economic growth, the naval buildup is not the only focus of Moscow's strategic thinking. Russia's United Shipbuilding Corporation has already announced plans to upgrade facilities in the Zalyv Shipyard (in Kerch, at the eastern tip of Crimea) which is large enough to "accommodate the size of slabs needed to construct [oil tankers] which can exceed 150,000 tons."[28] Indeed, Zalyv is the only shipyard in Russia than can build tankers of that size capable of operating in the Arctic. With an estimated nine billion barrels of oil in the Arctic, worth possibly US$900 billion, successful exploitation would help secure Russia's ambition to be an energy superpower.[29]

Strategic implications

Alongside more immediate implications of Crimea's annexation, there are a variety of strategic concerns that can already be identified. Some are the direct consequence of the ongoing crisis, while the significance of others has been underscored by the transformation of the strategic environment as a result of Russia's actions.

a. ***Ukraine's NATO ambition is dead –*** Perhaps the most obvious implication is that, like Georgia after the war in 2008, Ukraine's ambition to join NATO has been derailed for some time, if not permanently. While NATO will maintain its open door policy, no NATO government will urge Kyiv to take advantage of it: and Kyiv can no longer do so due to the consequences of a hostile response by Moscow. The control of Crimea, and the

augmentation of military and naval forces on the peninsula in the months since the occupation began, means that Russia is now able to threaten Ukraine on three fronts (along the northern, eastern and southern borders) and, without much difficulty, can deploy elements of the BSF to blockade the Ukrainian coastline in order to cripple the national economy and prevent sea-based resupply in the event of hostilities. The BSF has become a key instrument of Russia's policy in ensuring that Ukraine's strategic situation remains formidably challenging, if not completely untenable.

b. ***Projecting power is now easier –*** A second strategic implication is that power projection into the Mediterranean and beyond will be much easier for Russia. The port of Sevastopol, the key to its position in the Black Sea, is of critical importance as Russia seeks to regain some of the global clout that it lost following the disintegration of the Soviet Union. "In the past five to 10 years, there has been a resurgence in Russian naval operations, particularly in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean," one UK-based naval analyst has argued, adding that "Sevastopol has been an important hub to project Russian naval power."[30] This role will only become more pronounced as the BSF is modernised. Russia's interest in deploying elements of the BSF into the Mediterranean will continue to grow, leading one analyst to draw attention to what he termed its "strategic rebalancing".[31] His use of the phrase, most commonly applied to current US defence policy, was nonetheless justified for it recalls the role played in the 1970s and 1980s by the Soviet Mediterranean squadron in asserting Moscow's policies in a region otherwise dominated by the Western Powers.[‡‡] In 2013, the BSF conducted 17 operational voyages and made 39 port visits in the Mediterranean, including its largest fleet maneuvers in that sea since the end of the Cold War. That same year, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu declared that "the Mediterranean region was the core of all essential dangers to Russia's national interests". Immediately after, he announced that a new naval task force would be deployed in the Mediterranean on a permanent basis.[32] When that squadron is formed, and until a base is found to support it, many of the units for this new formation are likely to be drawn from and sustained by the BSF.

c. ***Naval CBMs in the Black Sea Basin are damaged –*** The annexation of Crimea, in light of the renewed emphasis that Moscow is placing on power projection in the Black Sea and Eastern Mediterranean, has damaged, perhaps irreparably, regional naval confidence-building measures (CBMs) that were created largely with Turkish sponsorship. BLACKSEAFOR, created in 2001, and Op. Black Sea Harmony that began in 2004, were designed to be all-inclusive, with a membership that included Turkey, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and Russia. While Russia vetoed US participation, Washington nonetheless strongly supported the Turkish initiatives. BLACKSEAFOR was intended to improve transparency through annual multilateral exercises. Op. Black Sea Harmony, on the other hand, was the equivalent of the NATO-led Op. Active Endeavour in the Mediterranean focused on deterring terrorist attacks and asymmetric threats, as well as maritime security in the Black Sea.[33] With both Ukraine and Georgia hostile to Russia, it is doubtful if these multilateral arrangements are still viable. Already, a BLACKSEAFOR exercise planned for mid-March 2014 was cancelled and has not yet been rescheduled.[34] Given shared interests in counter-terrorism and maritime security,

[‡‡] For a detailed analysis of Soviet maritime strategy in the Mediterranean, see Lyle J. Goldstein and Yuri M. Zhukov, "A Tale of Two Fleets: A Russian Perspective on the 1973 Naval Standoff in the Mediterranean", *The Naval War College Review,* Spring 2004, pp. 27-63. At that time, the role of the Soviet naval force was to make it risky for the US to use the Sixth Fleet to affect events ashore in the region. It is unclear if that is Russia's long-term intent, but it would be consistent with Moscow's policy of trying to thwart Western leadership in regional conflicts.

some form of new CBMs are likely to be proposed in the future, but such efforts will only be acceptable if they are compatible with Russian priorities

d. ***Energy dependence will mute any reaction to Russia's assertiveness –*** Turkey is obviously concerned about Russia's revival as well as the naval balance in the Black Sea, but its navy is becoming markedly inferior to the BSF.[35] Unable to alter the situation, it is anxious to mitigate that vulnerability by protecting its economic relationship with Russia.[36] Ankara declared the annexation of Crimea to be illegal, the foreign minister flew to Kyiv in early-March to show solidarity, and Prime Minister Recep Erdogan personally sought reassurances from Putin about the rights of the Tatar minority in Crimea.[37] However, Turkey has otherwise been muted. The crisis is occurring while the Islamist government in Ankara is gradually drawing away from its traditional Western allies, including the US, and it probably believes it has few options in dealing with a resurgent Russia.

   At the time of the Georgian War, Ankara decided that the best means of advancing its own regional interests was by coordinating its policies with Russia. The salience of such an approach will have been greatly reinforced by the success of Russia's Crimean operation.[38] Perhaps most important from a naval point-of-view, future requests from the US to relax the restrictions of the *Montreux Convention* (1936), a treaty that regulates the passage of ships through the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus and for the administration of which Turkey is responsible, will likely be rejected by Ankara.[§§] This limits the ability of Western naval Powers, and NATO more generally, to project power into the Black Sea to reassure Bulgaria and Romania or to demonstrate resolve. The impact of this restriction was very evident during Russia's war with Georgia when Ankara prevented an increased US naval presence in those waters and blocked the passage of the two US Navy hospital ships through the Straits.[39] More recently, its lack of flexibility concerning the Convention scuppered plans by Washington to deploy Aegis cruisers in the Black Sea as part of its missile shield programme.[40]

   Implicitly, Turkey's policy assists Russian naval ambitions. Recent events mean that it will continue to do so. The *Montreux Convention* provides significant advantages to Russian warships that are denied to non-Black Sea countries. As a result, Western naval power is effectively excluded from those waters. This leaves Russia free to project power into the Mediterranean, where it is earnestly trying to assert its interests, while forging new relationships in the Arab world, and further abroad.[41] That such a situation has made Russian naval operations dependent on Turkey is self-evident, but relative weakness militates against Ankara exploiting that advantage. Interestingly, Russia appeared to test Turkey's resolve to uphold the Convention early in its confrontation with Ukraine, when it accused Ankara (probably falsely) of not doing so. Upon receiving

[§§] Countries with a shore line on the Black Sea can transit warships through the Straits greater than 15,000 tons (save aircraft carriers that are prohibited) provided that Turkey is notified eight days in advance, and submarines must do so on the surface. Countries without a shore-line on the Black Sea have the right to transit no more than nine naval vessels through the straits provided that the total tonnage does not exceed 15,000 tons, and any such ships can remain in Black Sea waters for a maximum of 21 days. Countries without a Black Sea shore-line are not permitted to transit a submarine or an aircraft carrier through the Straits. See Stephen S. Roberts, The Turkish Straits and the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean", *Professional Paper 331*, Center for Naval Analysis, March 1982 and Cem Devrim Yaylali, "The Montreux Convention Regarding the Regime of the Straits: A Turkish Perspective", *Second Line of Defense* (online), 24 April 2014 [accessed on 3 July 2014 at http://www.sldinfo.com/the-montreux-convention-regarding-the-regime-of-the-straits-a-turkish-perspective/].

assurances that Turkey would never permit any violations, Russia immediately welcomed that response.[42]

e. ***Russia will more actively look for overseas bases –*** Russian naval ambitions are not limited to an increased presence in the eastern Mediterranean and its quest for global influence means that it will now more confidently seek overseas basing rights. Even before Crimea, Putin's government had already endorsed the Navy's plan to acquire bases abroad, but in light of that operation's success, it is reasonable to assume that Moscow will view that quest as of greater strategic importance. While it is unclear what role the BSF might play in this regard, it is probable that future deployments relying upon the Suez Canal will be composed of ships from that fleet. Deployments overseas meet a number of Russian policy objectives; to reclaim influence in certain regions; to secure political relationships and trade routes; to improve Russian political credibility by participating more actively in multilateral operations, such as counter-piracy or HADR. They would also be consistent with Russia's desire to challenge spheres of influence by other countries (notably the US).[43] Overseas bases will be, in that light, a force multiplier. Currently, Russia's only overseas base is Tartus in Syria, although access has been lost due to the ongoing civil war there. A number of options have been mentioned, including Algeria, the island of Socotra, and possibly a facility in Latin America.

f. ***US allies in the Asia-Pacific are concerned –*** Sharing the view of a former advisor to Japanese Premier Shinzo Abe who called the annexation of Crimea a "game changer", regional allies of the US are deeply troubled by the possibility that Washington might divert significant resources to confront the emerging Russian challenge to the European security order. At the same time, disturbed by the West's present restrained response to the Crimean annexation, they are fearful that the US might no longer be willing to protect them in the face Chinese expansionist aims (analogous to that of Russia *vis-à-vis* Ukraine). Many of these governments are now demanding more explicit defence commitments from the US.[44] This situation is unlikely to change any time soon, in part because Washington appears uncertain as to how best to respond to Russia. In any event, due to the drawdown of the US fleet, a major component of any balancing of commitments in response to threats in the Asia-Pacific and those emerging in Europe will necessarily be maritime, with consequences for naval planning by all US allies.

Conclusion

In a recent article in the prestigious journal, *Foreign Affairs*, political scientist Robert Legvold warns his readers that the Ukrainian crisis has fundamentally transformed the West's relations with Russia. "The crisis in Ukraine," he writes, "has pushed the two sides over a cliff and into a new relationship, one not softened by the ambiguity that defined the last decade of the post-Cold War period, where each party viewed the other as neither friend nor foe."[45] Within that understanding, the implications of Russia's seizure of Crimea are only now becoming evident. They resemble the ripples caused when a stone is tossed into a quiet pond. They radiate outwards: from the direct benefits to Russia (and the BSF, in particular) of the acquisition of Crimea and its magnificent harbour at Sevastopol: to broader assumptions of how naval power might become a more useful instrument of policy for Moscow: to how events in Europe are being viewed by non-European partners of the US. With that imagery in mind, Legvold's assessment urges an awareness that the international strategic environment is changing as other Powers, in this case Russia, more confidently seek to advance their own interests, even at

the risk of confrontations with both neighbours and the more *status quo* oriented liberal-democracies of the West. In doing so, the role of navies, and of naval power more generally, will assume greater prominence than they have since the end of the Cold War nearly a quarter century ago.

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Endnotes

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